Chapter VIII

Information Technology and Surveillance: Implications for Public Administration in a New World Order

Akhlaque Haque, University of Alabama at Birmingham, USA

Abstract

The Patriot Act of 2001 has introduced significant legislative changes impacting how public managers collect, disseminate, and evaluate information for decision making. The chapter describes the theoretical underpinnings of information gathering and decision making and argues that more information gathering and subsequent use of sophisticated information gathering tools serves as an important myth promoting greater legitimacy and confidence in the government’s ability to provide security to the citizens. The chapter suggests that the rational choice approach to security is limited in its ability to evaluate values that are embedded into the decision making processes. However, being cognizant of the nonrational rulings placed on technology-based policy initiatives, public managers can be guided toward “responsible values” to avoid the dark path of control, surveillance, and the loss of freedom.
Introduction

The Patriotic Act of 2001 has introduced significant legislative changes impacting the role of information technology (IT) in government. Although most changes have directly affected law enforcement agencies by giving them increased surveillance and investigative powers, more generally, the increased security environment has transformed ways in which public managers collect, disseminate, and evaluate information for decision making. What was initially spurred by the 9/11 terrorist attacks has now fundamentally changed how information technologies can be used in security and surveillance. Former HSD Secretary Tom Ridge termed the “War on Terrorism” as the “War of Information and Intelligence.” Because of immediate threat and limited resources, government policy has been focused toward centralization of federal authority in security, robustness, and reliability of the information infrastructure. Such reforms are reflected in the establishment of individual executive entities such as the National Intelligence Authority (NIA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

The purpose of the chapter is two-fold: First, the chapter argues that more information gathering and subsequent use of greater IT provides an important myth giving greater legitimacy to and confidence in the government’s ability to provide security to the citizens. Second, the increasing role of IT in security matters suggests that at the height of turbulence, the deterministic ruling of rational choice may become quite common. However, being cognizant of the implications of the values placed on technology-based policy initiatives, public managers can be guided toward “responsible values” to avoid the dark path of technology-driven “control, surveillance and the loss of freedom.”

The chapter has been divided into three sections. The first section brings to light earlier literature on information management and technology in public organizations. It is argued that the value placed on information gathering starts as strategic or symbolic in nature, yet can become functional necessity for making decisions. The second section discusses the implications of the Patriot Act and the centralization policy bias of the U.S. federal government. The final section highlights the new challenges for public administration in the new world order.

Information Gathering: A Strategic Choice for Organizations

Martha Feldman and James March in their seminal study “Information in Organizations as Signal Symbol” (1981) argued that the link between decisions and informa-
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